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ABSTRACT

This publication was prepared for the purpose of developing better understanding and greater appreciation between the Puerto Rican child who enrolls in the Chicago public schools and his classroom teacher. As a result of their experiences in teaching both in Puerto Rico and Chicago, the four participants in the Puerto Rico Exchange Teachers Program of 1968-69 present herein those aspects of the culture which would be likely to affect the child's classroom behavior. It is considered that an informed teacher may be able to assist the bicultural child to a considerable degree. (Author/DM)

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PUERTO RICAN CULTURE AS IT AFFECTS PUERTO RICAN CHILDREN IN CHICAGO CLASSROOMS.

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BOARD OF EDUCATION

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FOREWORD

This publication, Puerto Rican Culture As It Affects Puerto Rican Children in Chicago Classrooms, was prepared for the purpose of developing better understanding and greater appreciation between the Puerto Rican child who enrolls in the Chicago public schools and his classroom teacher.

As a result of their experiences in teaching both in Puerto Rico and in Chicago, the four Chicago participants in the initial Puerto Rico Exchange Teachers Program of 1968-69 present herein the traditions, customs, and mores of the Puerto Rican culture which, in their opinion, seem most likely to affect the classroom behavior of this bicultural American child.

The information included may bring to light some of the problems which the child faces when he is uprooted, frequently by circumstances over which he has no control, and placed in a culture completely different from his own. An informed teacher may be able to assist him considerably.

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WHO AM I?

The Puerto Rican of today is a fusion of the bloodstreams of the native Arawak Indians; of the Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, Dutch, Danish, Irish, and other European nationals who came to the island to fight or to trade and later returned to it to live; of the Africans who were imported as slaves; and of thousands of mainlanders who moved to the island.

In her book Puerto Rico: Island of Promise, Ruth Gruber gives the following description of the Puerto Rican:

> He is not Negro although 20 percent of the population is Negro. He is not an Indian yet the golden skin . . . the gentleness and hospitality of the Indians are a common trait all over the island. He is not a Spaniard yet he may have blond hair . . . or . . . pure white skin . . . of Barcelona.[1]

The Puerto Rican is generally a rather short, thin, wiry person. He is extremely friendly, warmhearted, and eager to help. Anyone needing assistance will be treated with great kindness.

Gustavo Agrait, professor of literature at the University of Puerto Rico, has said that the Puerto Rican is the nearest thing there is to a human alloy of the two dominant cultures of the Americas, a blend of the culture of Spain and that of the United States. He is by instinct either a Spaniard or a Norteamericano. He is Puerto Rican and so is his culture.

Racial discrimination is considerably less important in Puerto Rico than in the mainland United States. Negroes may be found at all economic levels, but the fact that the majority are at the bottom level

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[1] Ruth Gruber, Puerto Rico: Island of Promise (New York: Hill & Wang, Inc., 1960).

must be taken as some evidence of color discrimination in job opportunity. Tumin and Feldman found no color discrimination in education and only a negligible amount in social life.[2] Prestige is based on family name, professional background, and economic status.

What a traumatic experience for the Puerto Rican when, for the first time, he is faced with racial prejudice! Where does he fit when he knows that skin color among the members of his own family varies from light to dark? Must he and his family feel demeaned and rejected? How can be protect himself and his family in this climate? These are important considerations for the teacher of Puerto Rican children in Chicago.

WHAT'S MY NAME?

One's name is an important part of his identity and a person has a right to maintain it. The only time his name should be changed is when it would cause the child embarrassment, make him the brunt of jokes, or cause him to be otherwise taunted. Jesse and Lucy are frequently substituted for the Spanish names Jesús and Luz. Although such action may be justified, name changes cause distress to non-English-speaking children.

The Puerto Rican child states his name in the Spanish manner—Juan José Rodriguez Martinez. In mainland schools he will be known as Juan José Rodriguez because Rodriguez is the father's family name. Martinez is his mother's maiden name.

A bilingual person should explain that in the United States of America the child will be called Juan Rodriguez. It is the responsibility of the school administration to help the child and his parents

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[2]Arnold Feldman and Melvin M. Tumin, Social Class and Social Change in Puerto Rico (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 239.

understand that this is in accordance with the North American tradition for stating one's name.

WHO IS MY FAMILY?

Family ties are strong, and the family circle extends beyond the father, mother, and children to include godparents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and cousins. Success or tragedy affecting one member of a family affects all members of the family. No matter what catastrophe befalls an individual, some member of the family comes to his aid even if a trip is required from the mainland to the island or vice versa. As a guide to the behavior of many Puerto Ricans, it may be said that the heart is more important than the head.

WHERE IS MY BIRTH CERTIFICATE?

Puerto Ricans frequently take the children of relatives, friends, or neighbors into their homes and raise them as their own. The children usually retain their own family names, but they may, instead, take the name of the family with whom they are living. No legal adoption proceedings are followed. Difficulties frequently arise when a birth certificate or other legal document as proof of age and/or guardianship is demanded by the school. The family has no such evidence. The Puerto Rican has no concept of the reasoning behind such demands. The child exists. He lives with the family. His age and date of birth are stated. From the Puerto Rican point of view, that should suffice.

WHERE AM I FROM?

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the Puerto Rican migration to the United States is that it is a two-way, rather than a

one-way, movement. Persistence of a Puerto Rican way of life, especially among the low-income group, and even after many years of residence in the United States, is the result of many factors. One factor is the maintenance of close ties with Puerto Rico.

Most migration is from the rural areas to the city and thence to the mainland. Migration into the San Juan area has forced lower-status families to live in slums and caserios (housing projects). Severe overcrowding results from the rapid increase in population of the area. Relatives and near relatives tend to live with or near one another. The extended family eases the transition of the new migrant into the urban situation and makes possible a situation of mutual help. Beyond the extended family, the neighborhood is not integrated on a cooperative basis. Families may recite a history of accumulated grievances against their neighbors who may be derogated as noisy, dirty, immoral, and inconsiderate.

Physical crowding makes persons visible to each other. Few opportunities are provided for a person to deviate surrepititiously from the folkways and mores of his neighborhood. Since there are few economic and social differences between families in slums and caserios, persons are classified and evaluated according to their conformity with cultural norms. The environment creates aspirations without providing the means for their attainment.

WHERE IS MY FAMILY?

According to Juan Cruz and George R. Ricks in their monograph entitled Some Aspects of Puerto Rican Adaptation to Mainland U.S.A.—

> Typically, for families with children, the father migrates alone to find a job and living quarters; then brings over the rest of the family, often in stages. This results in a family that is divided between the continent and Puerto Rico and

> usually creates a situation in which part of a family is Americanized and the other is not. A less typical but not uncommon pattern is the "fatherless" family in which the mother decides to go to the mainland where jobs are plentiful and a "better" life is offered for women and children.[3]

If members of the extended family have preceded the newcomers, they aid these migrants in becoming established in the new environment. Puerto Ricans share whatever they have with less fortunate people.

The Puerto Rican child born in Puerto Rico and attending the Chicago public schools has been uprooted and torn from all he has ever known and holds dear. He finds himself in a hostile climate, among complete strangers, where nothing is familiar--not the people, not the buildings, not the clothing, not the vegetation, not even food. The sights, the sounds, and the smells are all strange to him. What is more, he does not know the language. No wonder he may become suspicious, fearful, lonely, miserable, and perhaps even hostile.

WHO IS MY TEACHER?

Since the teacher is probably the Puerto Rican child's first intimate contact with the mainlander, it is important that his acceptance of the child be completely free of any prejudicial, stereotyped ideas against the child's people. Otherwise, he will feel alienated, and it may be nearly impossible to win him back.

A teacher's winning smile and a warm, open greeting in an inviting, interested tone go a long way toward establishing a good relationship with the Puerto Rican child who is a newcomer. Giving him a place to put his belongings, a place to sit, and whatever materials he needs immediately will make the child feel that he belongs. The Puerto Rican

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[3] Board of Education of the City of Chicago, Bureau of Human Relations, Some Aspects of Puerto Rican Adaptation to Mainland U.S.A. (Chicago: the Board, 1967), p. 4.

child responds readily to warmth and kindness. A knowledge of this characteristic is significant to the Chicago teacher.

Puerto Rican teachers are even more affectionate toward their very young pupils than are teachers on the mainland. The children, in turn, are very affectionate toward their teachers. Upon leaving school, the children may even ask the teacher's blessing as they ask the blessing of their parents upon going to bed. The teacher is viewed as their in-school mother.

Parents show great affection for and interest in their children by accompanying them to and from school and inquiring about their behavior and progress. Mothers bring snacks and refreshments for their children at midmorning. At lunchtime they hover over their little ones to oversee their food intake. (Lunches are served free of charge to all public school children.) Many parents are seen in the school area before, during, and after school hours.

On the other hand, denial of parental responsibility is common in the environment of abject poverty. Often a teen-age brother or sister is found rearing younger members of the family while the father, mother, or both are living on the mainland. This is a most awesome task for the adolescent.

WHAT DO I WEAR?

School children in Puerto Rico wear uniforms. The fabrics, colors, and designs vary so that the child's school may be identified by the uniform he wears. His behavior reflects upon his school, and the school holds him accountable for his behavior. In middle class neighborhoods the schools have strict regulations regarding the wearing of the uniform. In lower socioeconomic groups, where the children may own only one uniform, the schools are somewhat more lax in this matter.

Many teachers wear uniforms also. The teachers consider this practice economical. The uniform gives them a professional appearance. Puerto Rican teachers—like American teachers—are very clothes conscious. They are extremely well dressed in or out of the uniform.

Teachers' dresses are stylish but conservative. Skirt length is of grave concern to all school personnel. Gentlemen teachers wear white shirts, ties, and dark-colored suits.

Many Puerto Rican children are inadequately clothed to withstand the cold winters to which Chicagoans are accustomed. Temperatures below 75° are considered cold in Puerto Rico.

In 1955, by legislative act, the School Footwear Program was created in Puerto Rico. To encourage school attendance, to protect the students' health, and to eliminate any possible psychological effects upon the students who attended school barefoot, it was decided to provide shoes for students who lacked the means to purchase them because of orphanhood, desertion, or circumstances such as unemployment, illness, or insufficient income on the part of parents or guardians. As a token payment, the law requires that 50 cents be paid by the student for each pair of shoes. The token payment also involves a promise by the student, his parents, or his guardian that the child will continue his studies. From 15 to 20 percent of the students enrolled in public day schools benefit from this program.

WHERE IS MY LUNCH?

All children in the public schools in Puerto Rico receive lunch free of charge. This service aims to improve the dietary habits of the children and to provide part of their daily diet. The average lunch,

which supplies nearly two-thirds of the nourishment a child needs each day, consists of rice, beans, sausages, a starchy vegetable, a green vegetable salad, fruit, and milk. In deprived areas children also receive free breakfast at school.

There is a 10-minute midmorning period for refreshments. Many children do not eat breakfast, and this opportunity for eating at 10 o'clock is very important to them. The lack of this practice would be disturbing to the Puerto Rican child and his parents.

HOW DO I BEHAVE?

Gestures, facial expressions, and behavioral patterns which are characteristic of the Puerto Rican may seem objectionable to the Chicago teacher. The Puerto Rican ideas of manners and decorum do not generally coincide with those of Chicagoans. Frequent interruptions in the classroom are accepted. Several persons may speak at the same time with rising pitch, volume, and intensity until it sounds as if they are quarreling. Actually, they are merely discussing their points of view. What seems like noisiness to the Chicagoan does not bother the Puerto Rican. Higher noise levels are acceptable in schools, meetings, places of business, public transportation facilities, social functions, and other situations in Puerto Rico.

The classroom environment in Puerto Rico is much less structured and less formal than in Chicago. Children are allowed to wander about the classroom or even leave it without permission. Older brothers and sisters or parents come into the classroom to converse with the children or to bring them snacks and refreshments. Some of the teachers eat in the classroom during school hours. Occasionally a child's dog spends the day in school with him. Children peering through the windows and

standing in the doorways of the classroom often hold conversations from their vantage points with friends and relatives in the room. The situation in Chicago is more confining, and the Puerto Rican child who seems restless may need time to adjust to a new code of conduct.

Puerto Rican children are more shy and less aggressive than Chicago students. Children in Puerto Rico depend heavily upon the father for leadership; whereas, on the mainland, individual initiative is stressed. A personal approach through patience, love, and understanding will establish confidence and gradually bring about a smooth adjustment.

Since most Puerto Rican children do not attend either Head Start or kindergarten, first graders are often extremely shy. Their silence results largely from a lack of experience and inability to express, even in their own language, those experiences they have had. In the family situation Puerto Rican children are seen and not heard.

The Puerto Rican is feeling his way in a totally new environment. If he does not respond, usually he is not being uncooperative or insolent. Such response usually indicates that he is frightened and does not understand what is expected of him. If the teacher is patient and does not push him, the child will respond on his own when he feels comfortable enough to participate. In some cases, this period of adjustment has taken as long as eight months. Eventually, the desire to emulate his peers will bring about his participation.

Puerto Ricans are, on an average, as law-abiding as any other Americans. Major crimes are very infrequent, and most crimes of violence are the result of matters of "amor" or family disputes. There is a higher percentage of drug addiction on the island than

there is in Chicago. According to Mr. Raul Vazques of the Welfare Division of the Department of Social Service, in an address at a meeting of the Northern Illinois University Community Internship Project in Puerto Rico on November 10, 1969, there are between 17,500 and 20,000 registered drug addicts on the island. It is estimated, however, that there may be between 70,000 and 80,000 addicts. Under the direction of the Center for Drug Addiction, headed by Dr. R. Morales-Boyer and Dr. Alberto Tristani, an extensive program of prevention and cure is in operation and is proving to be effective.

Among certain groups of Puerto Rican people, parents use terms in the presence of the children which are not acceptable to middle class mainland society. The child, in turn, uses these words without realizing their meaning. Girls as well as boys in inner city high schools may use obscene and crude terms quite casually, as if they were commonly accepted by the entire society. Such references would be shocking to many Chicago teachers.

WHY MUST I ATTEND SCHOOL?

In Puerto Rico, education is available from prekindergarten level through twelfth grade, and most children six years of age or older do attend school. There is a compulsory education law in Puerto Rico, but it is not rigidly enforced. The goal for the elementary level—grades one through six—for 1969-70 is to retain 76 percent of the first grade enrollment through sixth grade.

Although there are a few attendance officers in Puerto Rico, their function is more like that of a social worker investigating absences and alleviating their causes rather than enforcing school attendance. There are no fines or court proceedings for truancy or irregular school attendance.

Illnesses, deaths, wakes, funerals, extended visits, baptisms, birthdays, communions, confirmations, and weddings of close as well as distant relatives are treated with great concern and are among the principal causes of absence.

Different schools operate on different time schedules, so that it is difficult to know which children should be in school and which should not. Since there are few available substitute teachers, children are usually dismissed from school when the teacher is absent or when there is a teachers' meeting. There are children on the streets and peering through the school windows and doors at all hours of the day. A teacher may have as many learners outside the classroom as he has in it.

AM I ON TIME?

Mode and attitude of everyday living in Puerto Rico is not one of urgency. Those who work in the city are generally on time for work but not for other appointments. Meeting deadlines for contracts or assignments is not as significant to the Puerto Ricans as it is to mainlanders. They just do not understand why mainlanders insist upon being on time. Adjustment to the concept of punctuality involves a complete change of cultural pattern. This is a monumental, but necessary, task, because tardiness is not tolerated in Chicago schools nor in the mainland social structure.

ARE MY GRADES IMPORTANT?

Parents and children are very grade conscious. Teachers are required to keep detailed records of grades so that they can justify the test grades and daily work grades reported to the parents.

Parents do not interpret grades as a measure of the child's academic achievement, but more as a matter of family pride. They often

consider low grades an indictment of the family's competence. The result is a sense of lowered self-esteem in the parents and in the family as a whole.

WHAT IS MY RELIGION?

Approximately 80 percent of the Puerto Rican population is at least nominally Catholic, but far fewer practice their religion. Protestants followed the American flag to Puerto Rico and established many churches and schools. There is a Jewish community, and synagogues exist in some areas. Chinese, Japanese, and East Indians, who are few in number, also observe their religious rites.

Many Catholic churches throughout the island have services in both Spanish and English. Catholics endeavor to deepen their faith through lay participation movements, such as the cursillo--a form of retreat. It is usual to find lay people taking active part in the church services.

Spiritualism is everywhere on the island and has many sects. The leaders, some of whom are illiterate, are often worshiped personally, and the ceremonies involve ancient superstitions and fears. In some spiritualist rites the faithful participate in seances and listen to voices. This experience leads to a sort of religious frenzy, but there is none of the ritual violence found in voodoo.

WHAT FIESTAS DO I CELEBRATE?

Feast days of the Catholic Church are widely observed. Holy Week is a time of special ceremonies. In many communities Good Friday is marked by street processions. Bayamón is famous for its traditional procession with elaborate costuming and precious relics. Bayamoneses are eager to represent the principal characters involved in this ceremony. The participants carry images of the Virgin Mary, the Holy

Cross, and the Holy Sepulchre as they march slowly and mournfully, accompanied by the doleful beat of a single drum, along the street to the church. People come from great distances to witness this ceremony. The joyful phase of the Easter season begins after midnight on Holy Saturday—sábado de gloria--with feasting, dancing, and merrymaking.

One of the greatest fiestas is that of Saint John the Baptist, in whose honor Columbus originally named the island San Juan. The port was called Puerto Rico. As time passed, the name of the port and the name of the island were exchanged. There are celebrations for several days before and after June 24, the feast of St. John. Bonfires, around which thousands of families keep an all-night vigil, glitter on the beaches of Puerto Rico on the night of June 23. At dawn the people wade into the water to reenact symbolically Saint John's baptism of Christ. The Puerto Ricans believe that they are assured of good health during the coming year in this manner.

Puerto Rico is the land of two Christmases--Nochebuena (Christmas Eve) and Three Kings' Day (January 6)--when children traditionally expect gifts. Santa Claus and Christmas trees have been added to Puerto Rico's Christmas festivities. An indescribable nostalgia is felt by the mainland visitor when evergreens are put on sale at the supermarket parking lot in a temperature of 87°--the fragrance, the beauty, the bit of home!

On the eve of Three Kings' Day children put boxes of fresh grass under their beds for the camels (which have become horses in Puerto Rico) of the Three Wise Men. The next morning they find the grass replaced by toys and candy left by the grateful Magi (Los Tres Reyes Magos).

The Christmas season extends from early December to January 8. Groups of children go from door to door singing aguinaldos and villancicos (Christmas carols). Groups of singers and musicians playing guitars, cuatros, güiros, maracas, and other instruments also participate in trullas (noisemaking) and parrandas (parades). Often the strolling carolers are invited into the house to partake of special Christmas dishes: arroz con dulce—a special rice pudding; longanizas, butifarras, and morcillas—different kinds of sausage; pasteles—a plantain paste stuffed with chopped meat and other ingredients and cooked in plantain leaves; and lechón asado—lean pig, basted with a special sauce, well seasoned, and roasted whole on a spit over a bed of glowing charcoal for hours until the skin is golden brown and crackling crisp. These visits, called asaltos, occur nightly and last until the early morning hours.

New Year's Eve and New Year's Day are also marked by special celebrations. Birthdays and name days are celebrated elaborately.

Each town has its own patron saint whose day is a town holiday. Frequently people come from other towns to participate in these gala events; for example, on July 25, the villagers of Loiza Aldea start celebrating their week-long Fiesta de Santiago Apóstol (St. James the Apostle). He is believed to have helped the conquistadores vanquish the Indians. During the fiesta period a carnival atmosphere prevails, with merrymaking, dances, and parties going on all day and most of the night in the plaza and around the town. Men appear in traditional costumes and masks as caballeros, gentlemen representing good; vejigantes, representing evil; viejos, old men; and locas, crazy women. This ceremony is a mixture of the religious and the superstitious.

Because Puerto Rican children are accustomed to elaborate costuming, many believe that being included in a school program in the Chicago public schools requires them to provide their own costumes. Sometimes they do not participate in special activities if their parents cannot provide costumes. Rather than admit that they cannot afford this expense, the parents may request that the child be withdrawn from this activity, and the child is thus deprived of the opportunity to participate.

The ultimate goal of the Puerto Rican child is to become bilingual and bicultural. The teacher who becomes increasingly aware of the factors involved in the adjustment of the migrant American child to his new cultural environment is better equipped to make the transition smoother and more pleasant for the child.